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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

22 December 1967
Rev. 27 Dec 67

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Communist Reactions to US Operations in the DMZ
(ONE Distribution Only)

NOTE TO THE BOARD

This memo is in response to a Defense Department request. You will recall that the request mentioned only Communist reactions to "small unit" operations and "slightly larger" actions in the northern half of the DMZ and/or North Vietnamese territory immediately adjacent. In this memo we have not tried to work out detailed scenarios because of our limited knowledge of the hypothetical operations in question. The memo is in two parts: Part I is very general; Part II is an elaboration and may not be necessary.

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GROUP I
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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Communist Reactions to US Operation in the Northern DMZ*

I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Communist reaction to US operations in the northern half of the DMZ area and adjacent North Vietnamese territory would be shaped by a number of considerations. Of first importance would be how each of the Communist countries (NVN, China and the USSR) read ultimate US intentions. These interpretations of US policy would, in turn, rest to a great extent on the circumstances and exact nature of the operations. Communist responses would also be influenced in some degree by what the US said about the operation and its objectives.

2. There are obviously a number of different kinds of operations within the DMZ area which the US could undertake: small company-size thrusts against specific objectives such as artillery concentrations, battalion-size operations to clear

* Throughout this memorandum references to the DMZ mean the northern portion.

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larger areas or disrupt Communist concentrations; and division level operations to establish a new defensive line. It is not possible to estimate with much assurance which each of the various US operations would provoke. Certain moves would have to be made to cope with the immediate, tactical situation, while other moves might be set in motion as a contingency against further US actions.

3. We think the following general estimates can be made.

-- The more limited the US action the more likely that the Communist would limit their response.

-- The Communists are likely to see a major difference between US operations confined to the northern half of the DMZ and operations on the same scale which extend into North Vietnamese territory.

-- The Communists are likely to be much more apprehensive over US intentions if operations in the DMZ or beyond are undertaken along with or after any new ground operations in Laos and/or Cambodia.

-- At some point, when Hanoi desires, Chinese combat troops would probably be deployed in the northern parts of NVN primarily to deter the US, but also to prepare against a major US invasion.

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-- Chinese combat forces would probably intervene in combat if US operations were extended well up into the panhandle of NVN.

-- No Soviet intervention is likely even if US operations extend into North Vietnam territory north of the DMZ, but new Soviet material assistance would be highly likely in order to strengthen NVN defenses against an invasion.

-- Operations confined to the general DMZ area are not likely in themselves to change North Vietnam's attitude toward a compromise political settlement.

II. SPECIFIC RESPONSES

4. The North Vietnamese Position. In recent months the North Vietnamese leaders have indicated increased concern over the possibility that the US will expand ground actions into NVN. In September, General Giap publicly speculated on this and warned that the US would be attacking the mainland of a member country of the socialist camp. "In this enlarged war", he added, "the US imperialists would meet with incalculable serious consequences. The war would not develop according to the imperialists' subjective expectations." If, as this article suggests,

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the North Vietnamese leadership has given serious thought to a US "invasion", they presumably have roughed out their own counteractions, and, as Giap implies, the expected contributions from the "socialist camp."

5. The North Vietnamese would, of course, contest any US operations in the DMZ. They have large forces in this general area. Some of the regiments and battalions in Quang Tri Province might be pulled back to counter a fairly large US action. Hanoi would probably move some of the combat units from the Red River delta down the coast to reinforce likely routes of invasion. If US operations were fairly large and threatened to establish a new defensive line along the northern boundary of the DMZ this would probably further strain North Vietnamese manpower and resources. Thus one effect of prolonged operations might be that Hanoi would be forced to curtail infiltration of personnel into South Vietnam. On the other hand, NVA forces in SVN, especially those in the two northern provinces, would try to take advantage of any thinning out of US forces caused by the DMZ operations.

6. It is possible that Hanoi might decide to relieve the pressures on the DMZ by taking new military action in Laos.

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Hanoi might calculate that limited moves either in the panhandle or northern provinces would deter the US from any plans to enlarge the DMZ operations. This seems unlikely, however, if only because Hanoi would want to conserve its forces against the threat of a major US invasion, and, in fact, would probably fear that military escalation in Laos would only hasten larger US actions against North Vietnam.

7. It is not possible to determine at what point Hanoi would feel so threatened as to call for outside assistance beyond what it already receives. It might do so immediately upon an incursion of any considerable scale or duration into the northern part of the DMZ. It seems more likely that Hanoi would arbitrarily decide that US operations beyond the DMZ, if these actions were anything more than brief forays, would call for a major response involving at least the deterrent value of threatened Chinese and Soviet intervention.

Peking's Reaction

8. Though judgments concerning Communist China continue to be complicated by the confused internal situation, we estimate that China would probably intervene in the war if the US made a

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major invasion of North Vietnam. Peking would not necessarily judge that a major invasion had taken place if US operations were confined to the DMZ, or even if they included North Vietnamese territory in the immediate vicinity. But if US actions continued for some time and were expanded in size we believe the Chinese would at some point view the situation as serious enough to warrant sending ground combat units into North Vietnam, and Hanoi would probably agree. Peking would probably also make other contingency preparations, such as strengthening their air and ground forces in South China, as well.

9. We see no evidence of any important change in Peking's basically cautious policy with respect to risk military confrontation with the US. But if our judgment that China would intervene in the event of a major invasion of North Vietnam is correct, Peking would probably calculate that giving firm indications that it was prepared to fight would be more prudent than appearing to hesitate or equivocate. Thus China's immediate aim would be to deter further US action and strengthen Hanoi's resolve. Chinese troops would be unlikely to engage US forces immediately north of the DMZ, but some Chinese units might deploy as far South as Vinh.

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10. The Chinese might not publicly acknowledge their new commitment, as has been the case with their AAA, engineer and logistic units already in North Vietnam. But it seems more likely that Hanoi and Peking would want to publicize the increased Chinese commitment in some way. If so, a touchy situation would arise. The US would have to take into account the political complications of the overt presence of Chinese forces, which would be subject to attack by US air operations over North Vietnam.

11. Because their first purpose in sending ground troops to North Vietnam would be to deter the US, and because they still would hope to avoid a major Sino-US confrontation, the Chinese probably would not attempt any diversionary action elsewhere around China's periphery. Nevertheless, larger Chinese involvement in North Vietnam would probably be attended by other military movements -- precautionary from Peking's point of view. But the US could never be certain that such moves did not have more ominous implications. In short, should Chinese troops move into North Vietnam there would be a considerable heightening of international tensions.

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12. The Soviet Position. The Soviets would probably fear that US operations in the northern part of the DMZ, even of a limited nature, portended a general escalation of the war. Such escalation has long troubled Moscow, even though the USSR has seen certain political advantages for its own interests in prolonging the fighting. The Soviets would have little choice but to meet North Vietnamese appeals for increased assistance. At the same time, we think they would be somewhat more inclined to put pressure on Hanoi to stop the fighting.

13. Soviet support would probably include those kinds of weapons which could strengthen Hanoi's capability to deal with a major US invasion (limited range ground support missiles, coastal defense missiles). The Soviets might believe that providing "volunteers" to man some of these weapons would have some deterrent value on the US. Along with such aid, the Soviets would also try to check further US action by strong warnings and perhaps a demonstrative political protest against the US (e.g. terminating certain negotiations or contacts). We continue to believe, however, that the Soviets would avoid any commitment of their own combat forces to direct participation, and they would avoid provoking situations elsewhere in the world that would have the effect of generalizing the Vietnam crisis.

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14. If US military operations seemed certain to expand well into North Vietnamese territory and on a fairly large scale, the Soviets would probably feel impelled by the dangers they foresaw to try to convince Hanoi to change its policy. They would not withhold aid, but they might argue vigorously that Hanoi's dependence on China would become overwhelming. They might also feel it had to take some diplomatic action, regardless of Hanoi's desires, such as using their position as Geneva co-chairman to press for a cease fire or UN action.

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